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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to extend research on parenting styles and parent-child socialization beyond the dyadic relationships and toward inclusion of variables that give information about the couple's co-parenting, that is, the way they work together as parents. At the initial assessment, 45 predominantly middle-class families with a preschool-age child took part in a laboratory visit. Both parents completed questionnaires about their marital relationship, while raters evaluated each parent's relationship with the child during laboratory play sessions. A total of 38 families took part in follow-up assessments 2 years later, in which kindergarten teachers evaluated each child's academic and social adaptation to school. Correlational and multiple regression analyses examined the extent to which marital quality, the quality of mothers' and of fathers' parenting during dyadic sessions, and the differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles helped predict children's academic and social adjustment. Results demonstrated that although the quality of mothers' and fathers' marital life and parenting was linked with some aspects of children's adjustment during kindergarten, in many instances, information about the co-parenting system helped predict children's adjustment over and above the contributions of marriage and parenting. (Author/MDM)

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The Co-Parenting System: Longitudinal Effects for Kindergartners of Differences between Mothers' and Fathers' Parenting Styles

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Paper presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, New Orleans, LA, March 1993

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to extend research on parenting styles and parent-child socialization beyond the examination of dyadic relationships and toward the inclusion of variables that give information about *the couple's co-parenting*, that is the way they work together as parents. The longitudinal effects of one aspect of co-parenting -- differences between the parenting styles of preschool-age children's mothers and fathers -- on children's functioning two years later are explored. It was hypothesized the similarities in parenting styles (positive co-parenting evaluations) during preschool would be predictive of children's adjustment during kindergarten

At the initial assessment, forty-five families with a preschool age child took part in a laboratory visit, and both parents completed self-report questionnaires about their marital relationship. Raters evaluated each parent's emotional expression, responsiveness, limit setting, and structuring during parent-child play sessions in a laboratory playroom. The differences between each mother's and father's style on these dimensions were used to represent their co-parenting. Thirty-eight of the families took part in the follow-up assessment two years later in which kindergarten teachers evaluated each child's academic and social adaptation to school.

Correlational and multiple regression analyses examined the extent to which marital quality, the quality of mothers' and of fathers' parenting during dyadic sessions, and the differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting styles helped predict children's academic and social adjustment during kindergarten. Results demonstrate that while the quality of mothers' and fathers' marital life and parenting is linked with some aspects of children's adjustment during kindergarten, in many instances, information about the co-parenting system helps predict children's adjustment over and above the contributions of marriage and parenting. However, contrary to hypotheses, the extent to which mothers' and fathers behave in similar ways was not always predictive of their child's adjustment. Differences in the affective aspects of parenting styles were generally predictive of teachers' perceptions of children as having more externalizing difficulties but also as having fewer withdrawn, immature and internalizing problems than other children. These findings are examined from a contextual and family systems perspectives. Though at times contrary to hypotheses, the results suggest the importance of incorporating family interactions and systemic constructs in parenting research.

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INTRODUCTION

Parenting is most frequently explored in the context of dyadic parent-child relationships. Family systems perspectives on child development, however, emphasize the interconnections among all family subsystems including the mother-child, father-child, father-mother, and therefore suggest the possible importance for children's development of the co-parenting system, that is, the ways that mothers and fathers work together or fail to work together as parents. This study extends current parenting research by examining the longitudinal effects of one aspect of co-parenting -- differences between the parenting styles of preschool-age children's mothers and fathers -- on children's adaptation to kindergarten two years later.

A few studies have examined one feature of the co-parenting system -- differences between parents' attitudes about parenting. The findings of this research have suggested consistent links between agreement about parenting philosophies and characteristics of (1) marriages, (2) parenting behavior and (3) children's development. Greater differences in mothers' and fathers' childrearing values are linked with an increased likelihood of parental divorce (Block, Block, & Morrisson, 1981) and less effective parenting practices (Deal, Halverson, & Wampler, 1989), and increase the probability of children, especially boys, manifesting undercontrolled personality styles as preschoolers and adolescents (Block et al., 1981; Vaughn, Block & Block, 1988).

An earlier study with the present sample also found that the functioning of the co-parenting system was related to concurrent assessments of preschoolers' adjustment. When preschoolers received different amounts of nurturance and warmth from their mothers and fathers, they had difficulty concentrating on tasks and tended to express more negative affect when the entire family played together (Kaplan, 1991). These findings were interpreted to suggest that parenting style differences pose challenges to young children and may have the greatest impact on children's attentiveness and expression of anxiety and distress.

Family systems models and the findings described above informed the hypotheses of the current study. It was hypothesized that differences between parents' styles when children were preschoolers would be distressing for them two years later as they make the transition to kindergarten. Over and above marital conflict and the quality of parent-child relationships, parenting style differences in responsiveness, emotional expression, limit setting and structuring would be predictive of children's academic and social distress during kindergarten.

METHOD

Participants

Thirty-eight predominantly middle-class couples and their children (19 girls & 19 boys) participated in the initial and follow-up assessments of this study. At the initial assessment, children were approximately 3 1/2 years old (mean=3 years, 10 months; s.d.=4.12 months). The families were drawn from a larger sample of families involved in a longitudinal research project on the transition to parenthood. (See, e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1990 for a detailed description of the sample and the design of the longitudinal study.)

Procedure

Initial Assessment. Each parent completed a questionnaire about their marital relationship, and the mother-child and father-child dyads each participated in separate 40 minute laboratory sessions that included structured "teaching" tasks and unstructured sandplay. A male-female team observed and evaluated the sessions.

Follow-up Assessment. Two years later, when the children were in the early months of kindergarten, each child's teacher completed a questionnaire describing that child's academic and social adjustment to school.

Measures

• *Marital Conflict:* Both husbands and wives responded to the Short Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959). Half of the items on this 16-item questionnaire specifically address the amount of conflict a partner experiences on a range of topics related to couple life. These items are rated on a 6-point scale from "always disagree" to "always agree". Using a standardized scoring of these items, an index was calculated that represented the amount of marital conflict in the relationship.

• *Parenting Style:* At the conclusion of each parent-child laboratory session, global ratings of the parent's behavior were made by the raters. Four scales describing different qualities of parent-child relationships were created from this coding system. These include Emotional Expression, Responsiveness, Limit Setting, and Structuring (see Table 1).

Average interrater reliability (assessed by Pearson correlations) for the items included in these scales ranged from .74 to .83 for evaluations of mothers' and fathers' parenting, and scale reliabilities were generally high (alphas ranging from .77 to .92).

•*Co-parenting--Differences in Parenting Style:* A score was created for each couple that represented the degree to which their parenting styles on each of the four dimensions differed from each other. The difference score was calculated by taking the absolute value of the difference between the husband's and wife's scale score (see Fisher, et al., 1985). The reliability of these scales were generally moderately high (average alphas=.75).

•*Children's Adjustment to Kindergarten:* An adaptation of the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (Schaefer & Hunter, 1983) was completed by each child's kindergarten teacher during the fall of the school year. Teachers used this instrument to describe each child in their class without knowing which child was in the study. Scores for children in the same classroom were converted to z-scores so that teacher evaluations represented the behavior of the child in the study in comparison to other children in her class. Four scales were created for use in this study: Academic Competence, Externalizing Behavior, Internalizing Behavior, and Immaturity (see Table 1).

RESULTS

In the sample, there were some couples in conflictual marriages. Overall, mothers and fathers tended to be generally responsive, expressive and somewhat structuring during interactions. Most couples did differ at least slightly in their parenting styles. Due to the small sample and the exploratory nature of this study, significance levels below the .1 level will be reported.

Marital and Parenting Quality and Children's Adjustment

Modest relationships between marital conflict and children's adaptation were found. Children whose parents were in conflictual relationships when they were young exhibited more externalizing behavior in kindergarten (p's $< .1$).

The quality of parent-child relationships during preschool also had modest associations to children's kindergarten adaptation as well. Children whose mothers were responsive to them were less immature in their school behavior ($p < .1$), and children whose fathers set limits showed fewer

externalizing behaviors in school ($p < .1$). Surprisingly, fathers who were warm and very structuring had children who were more withdrawn and shy in school than other children ($p < .1$).

Co-parenting and Children's Adjustment

Hierarchical step-wise multiple regression analyses were designed to predict children's adaptation to school (see Table 2 for a schematic model of the equation). Separate analyses were performed for each type of parenting and each measure of children's adjustment.

Table 3 shows the extent to which co-parenting predicts children's adaptation over and above the contribution of marital and parenting quality, i.e. the significance of the final step of the equation. Overall, differences in parents' emotional expression and responsiveness were more predictive of children's kindergarten adaptation that were differences in parents' limit setting and structuring.

Children's Academic Adjustment

Co-parenting variables did not help explain additional variance in children's academic competence beyond that explained by the quality of parents' marriage and parenting.

Children's Externalizing Behavior

Over and above the variance explained by marital and parenting quality, couples who differed in the amount of responsiveness they showed to their child during preschool were more likely to have children described as exhibiting externalizing behavior during kindergarten (Table 3).

Children's Internalizing Behavior

Over and above the links between marital and parenting quality and children's behavior, couples who differed in the amount of positive emotion they expressed and in the amount of responsiveness they showed to their child during preschool were more likely to have children described by their teachers as exhibiting fewer internalizing behaviors than other children (see Table 3). Though these results were not predicted by the hypotheses of this study, they provide support for the importance of examining parents' co-parenting.

Children's Immaturity

Differences in parents' responsiveness to their child during preschool years were predictive of the likelihood of teachers to evaluate those children as more mature (less immature) than other children even over and above the variance accounted for by parents' marriage and parenting (see Table 3).

Differences in parents' structuring of tasks when playing with their preschool age child, however, were associated with teachers' descriptions of the child as more immature than other children in the early months of kindergarten over and above the variance explained by parents' marriage and parenting (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that co-parenting as represented by differences in parenting styles during preschool were predictive of children's behavioral adjustment during kindergarten independent of the variance accounted for by parents' marital conflict and the quality of mothers' and fathers' parenting. Children seem to be most strongly affected by parenting style differences in the affective dimensions of parenting (warmth, responsiveness). Possibly because of their age,

differences in the amount and quality of nurturance might be more salient for preschoolers than differences in mothers' and fathers' limits and structuring.

Couple differences in positive emotion and responsiveness were associated with externalizing behavior and the absence of internalizing and immature behavior. These findings suggest that when parents have different styles of interacting with their young child, their child is less likely than children of parents with similar styles to be shy, withdrawn or immature in school but may be at risk for externalizing difficulties during the early school years. That parenting style differences seem to be predictive of a decreased likelihood of internalizing problems in children is surprising; however, these findings may be due in part to the nature of the sample. Most mothers and fathers in this study behaved similarly or moderately differently from each other; few showed extreme differences in parenting styles. While modest parenting style differences have been shown to be distressing in some ways for preschoolers when interacting with both parents at the same time, these modest differences between their two parents may help children adjust to yet another situation (kindergarten) and another person whose behavior and expectations may differ from their parents (their teacher) without seeming shy and withdrawn. Greater differences in mothers' and fathers' parenting might still be likely to have more consistently adverse effects for young children.

There is some suggestion that differences in structuring, when statistically related to children's adjustment, seemed to have different implications for children in this study than differences in parents' warmth and responsiveness, i.e., when parents differed in their structuring of tasks during preschool, children were more likely to act immaturely in school; when they differed in their warmth and responsiveness, children were less likely to act immaturely in school. Though further explorations are necessary to substantiate these findings, they suggest different implications for children of consistent (or inconsistent) nurturance and consistent (or inconsistent) structuring and communication.

These results together suggest that the relationship between parenting styles and children's behavior is more complex than previously described, and one must examine familial variables to address this complexity. Co-parenting differences when children are young seem to be one source of risk for children's behavior patterns and difficulties (e.g., internalizing vs. externalizing difficulties) in the early school years.

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Table 1. Description of parenting style scales and children's adjustment scales.

I. Parenting Style Scales

AFFECTIVE/RESPONSIVE QUALITIES

Emotional Expression: pleasure & the absence of anger

Responsiveness: warmth, responsiveness & respect for children's autonomy

DEMANDING/STRUCTURING QUALITIES

Limit setting: limit setting & maturity demands

Structuring: structuring of tasks & clarity of communication

II. Children's Adjustment Scales

Academic competence: Intelligence, creativity & concentration on tasks

Externalizing behavior: Antisocial, hostile & hyperactive behaviors

Internalizing behavior: Introversion, tension & depression

Immaturity: Physical/emotional immaturity & physical symptoms (e.g. stomach aches)

Table 2. Schematic Model of Multiple Regression Equation.

Step 1: Mothers' reports of marital conflict

Fathers' reports of marital conflict

Step 2: Mothers' parenting[a]

Fathers' parenting

Step 3: Co-parenting: Differences between mothers' and fathers' parenting

Dependent Variables: Children's adaptation to kindergarten[b]

[a] either emotional expression, responsiveness, limit setting or structuring

[b] either academic competence, externalizing, internalizing or immaturity

Table 3. Multiple regression analyses: Co-parenting's links with kindergarten adaptation after parents' marital and parenting quality have been controlled in the analyses. (N=38)

	CHILDREN'S ADAPTATION							
	Academic competence		Externalizing		Internalizing		Immaturity	
	R^2Chg	Beta	R^2Chg	Beta	R^2Chg	Beta	R^2Chg	Beta
Differences in Parents' EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION					.08+	-.33		
Differences in Parents' RESPONSIVENESS			.08+	.29	.12*	-.36	.08+	-.30
Differences in Parents' LIMIT SETTING								
Differences in Parents' STRUCTURING							.14+	.41

+ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$

Note. Only statistically significant relationships are reported.